

AFGHANISTAN AFTER FIVE YEARS:
STATUS OF THE CONFLICT, THE AFGHAN RESISTANCE AND THE U.S. ROLE

Richard P. Cronin
Specialist in Asian Affairs
Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division

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ABSTRACT

Over the past five years Soviet control over Afghanistan has slowly but steadily increased. Soviet forces now total an estimated 115,000 troops. The Afghan guerrillas continue to control most of the countryside, but increased Soviet air attacks and reprisals against pro-resistance villages have made operations more difficult for them. The Afghan resistance continues to battle on, apparently with increased battlefield cohesiveness, but remains divided between Islamic "fundamentalists" on the one hand, and "moderates" on or "traditionalists" on the other. Recent press reports indicate a major increase of U.S. aid to the Afghan resistance, despite apparent opposition of some intelligence officials and others. Congress has been overwhelmingly supportive of the Afghan cause to date, but press reports on the covert aid program may lead to a more open debate on this issue.

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Status of the Conflict

The December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan and the resultant conflict between the Afghan mujahidin ("freedom fighters") and Soviet and regime forces dealt a devastating blow to a traditionalist, predominantly tribal Islamic society and cast an enduring chill over East-West relations. Over the past five years Soviet control of that country has slowly but steadily increased. Moscow's military commitment now totals an estimated 115,000 troops, versus about 85,000-90,000 in mid-1980. These forces are backed by an additional 40,000 troops on the Soviet side of the Afghanistan border.

The Soviets also dominate Afghanistan's security forces and the bureaucracy. They have constructed extensive military and logistical facilities to support their forces and have tied Afghanistan closer than ever to the Soviet economic system.

The Soviet occupation and the internal turmoil in the country have caused the flight of one-fourth or more of the pre-1979 population. Close to 3 million refugees are reported to be in Pakistan, mainly in the border areas of the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Some 1-1.5 million Afghan refugees are also reported to be in Iran.

The Afghan resistance movement continues to oppose the Soviet occupation and to carry out regular small unit guerrilla actions. The mujahidin appear to have gained some greater battlefield cooperation but still lack a common political platform and remain divided by ideological, sectarian, and tribal differences and by personal rivalries.

Press reports credit the resistance with as many as 100-200,000 or more fighters, but only a fraction of these are in contact with Soviet and Afghan government forces at any given time. 1/ The Soviets are in firm control of Kabul, the capital, and the neighboring military complex at Bagram, and now reportedly control Herat and Kandahar, two important cities in West and Southwest Afghanistan. 2/ The mujahidin retain free movement over most of Afghanistan's mountainous countryside, and the ability to mount limited rocket, mortar and small arms attacks on Soviet garrisons in urban areas.

One of the most important resistance strongholds is the Panjsher Valley in northeastern Afghanistan, which begins near the strategic Salang Pass highway linking Kabul with the Soviet border to the North (see map). In early 1984 the seventh major Soviet offensive against the Panjsher resulted in great devastation and the flight of the remaining population, but apparently achieved no permanent military gain. The April-June Panjsher VII operation created enormous devastation but failed to eliminate the forces of Ahmed Shah Mahsud, the most celebrated resistance commander. Although Soviet troops continued to occupy the mouth of the valley, the guerrillas returned in force to its upper reaches and reportedly have resumed operations against Soviet and regime forces in the area.

1/ According to one report, "estimates range upwards from 30,000." Borders, William. Afghanistan's Five-Year Ordeal: Grim Outlines of a Ferocious War. New York Times, December 17, 1984. p. A1, 14. Another source notes that estimates of active guerrillas vary from 20,000 to over 100,000. Felton, John, "Budget Item Opens a Window on Afghan War." Congressional Quarterly. August 4, 1984. p. 1904. A New York Times article earlier noted that "Total Afghan guerrilla forces could be as high as 200,000." Gelb, Leslie H. "U.S. Said to Increase Arms Aid for Afghan Rebels. New York Times. May 4, 1983. p. 1.

2/ New York Times, December 17, 1984. p. A1, 14.

The Soviet Occupation 3/

Notwithstanding its difficulties, the Soviet Union has made some clear gains that it would not willingly relinquish. It has kept a communist regime in power in a sensitive border region and has gained some strategic advantages, including an expanded airbase at Shindand, in southwestern Afghanistan, which puts Soviet tactical aircraft nominally within range of the Straits of Hormuz, in the Persian Gulf.

The occupation has significant costs. The war is estimated to cost the Soviets about \$3 billion per year, although such estimates by their nature are highly judgmental. Politically, the Soviets have incurred the widespread criticism of Third World and Islamic countries, worsened relations with the West, and successive annual defeats in U.N. votes on Afghanistan. Estimates of Soviet military casualties vary widely. As of late 1984, the U.S. State Department estimated about 25,000 Soviet casualties, about one third of which are said to be combat deaths.

Soviet strategy seems to be to maintain control of Afghanistan with a minimum military commitment while seeking to train a new generation of Afghan communist leaders loyal to Moscow. It is reportedly training as many as 10,000 Afghans annually in the Soviet Union both to rebuild the Afghan army and to staff the administrative bureaucracy. The results have been unspectacular to date, with many Afghans returning with negative attitudes towards

3/ This section summarized information from a number of sources including Bradsher, Henry S. Afghanistan. The Washington Quarterly. Summer 1984. p. 42-55; Borders, William. Afghanistan's Five-Year Ordeal: Grim Outlines of a Ferocious War. New York Times, December 17, 1984; Cronin, Richard. Afghanistan. 1984 Yearbook on International Communist Affairs. Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1984. p. 186-195; Hempstone, Smith. Soviets Are Willing to Pay the Price. Washington Times, January 4, 1985. p. 1-2C; and U.S. Department of State. Afghanistan: Five Years of Tragedy. Current Policy No. 636. November 14, 1984.

Soviet society and even more with an aversion to risky duty in the military or in government jobs outside secure areas.

The government of Babrak Karmal continues to lack popular support and remains divided between the dominant pro-Soviet Parcham ("banner") faction and a more radical and xenophobic Khalqi ("masses") faction. The Afghan military and the bureaucracy have been demoralized and decimated by defections to the resistance and the flight of officials and soldiers to refuge in Pakistan. The Afghan army has shrunk from a pre-1979 level of 80,000-90,000 to about 30,000-40,000 at present. Soviet leaders and spokesmen continue to profess optimism about reconstructing the country along "Socialist" lines, but acknowledge that it will take many years.

The Soviets have resorted increasingly to heavy and indiscriminate air and artillery attacks on pro-resistance villages, with the clear objective of denying the mujahidin vital access to the local population for support. As a consequence, the population of Kabul and other cities has swollen and the countryside has become largely depopulated. Recurring reports say that the Soviets have also employed chemical weapons, and have carried out brutal massacres of Afghan civilians.

These tactics may in time seriously handicap the ability of the resistance to carry on effective military operations. While the depopulation of the countryside removes the need of the mujahidin to defend their families and farms, it also eliminates the prime asset of the guerrilla -- the ability to blend into the population and live off the land. At a minimum, Soviet tactics will tend to increase guerrilla dependence on external supplies and on more extensive supply lines.

UN Negotiations

Indirect talks under U.N. auspices, nominally conducted between Pakistan and Afghanistan, have failed to produce a negotiated settlement. The talks are thought by some to have had some utility by outlining in broad terms what a negotiated settlement might look like and how it might come about. Moscow maintains that the priority issue is ending "foreign interference" in support of the resistance, while Pakistan insists on a firm Soviet timetable for withdrawal and the creation of conditions that will permit the return of the refugees. The current framework apparently provides no formula for any meaningful role on the part of the various resistance groups and pre-1978 political parties. Moscow's professed support for an independent and nonaligned Afghanistan is contradicted by evidence that it would only tolerate a Soviet dominated government.

Afghan Resistance Groups

Afghan resistance forces are represented by a number of political groups operating out of Pakistan. The largest and most well known groups have headquarters in and around Peshawar, Pakistan, near refugee camps in the Northwest Frontier Province. Smaller and less well known groups operate out of Quetta, near the Afghan frontier in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province.

The political groups in Pakistan do not directly correspond to the resistance fighters in Afghanistan, although most of the Peshawar groups maintain forces in the field. Most refugees in Pakistan belong to the Pushtun tribal groups from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border regions,

whereas much of the fighting involves Tajiks, Hazaras and other minorities not strongly represented in Pakistan. Nonetheless, the Pakistan based groups represent an important conduit for outside funds and supplies. ^{4/} There have been allegations that some of the Peshawar groups sell donated arms and supplies to resistance fighters for exorbitant prices.

The Main Political Groups

The resistance forces in Pakistan are divided into two broad groupings -- the "fundamentalists" and the "moderates" or "traditionalists." The former groups in some cases existed before the 1978 coup and have a developed ideology and organizational structure. The largest of these, the Jami'at-e Islami, has ties to similar groups in Pakistan and other countries. The "traditionalists" are also Islamic but tend to follow a more secular-nationalist outlook and to be organized on the basis of personal followings and tribal ties. ^{5/} (See appendix for details of the groupings)

U.S. Aid to the Resistance

Covert U.S. aid to the Afghan resistance has remained a controversial issue. According to press accounts, the United States began a low level program to arm the resistance in early 1980, during the Carter administration. The Reagan administration apparently expanded the program after entering into a close security cooperation relationship with Pakistan, but for the past several years various considerations apparently limited the amount of

^{4/} U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. Hidden War: The Struggle for Afghanistan; A Staff Report Prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations [John B. Ritch III]. Washington, U.S. Government Print. Off., April 1984. p. 22, 26-27.

^{5/} Roy, Olivier. Islam in the Afghan Resistance. Religion in Communist Lands. Vol. 12, Spring 1984. p. 55-68.

U.S. aid and the types of weapons supplied. It is widely believed, for instance, that Pakistan objects to supplying anti-aircraft weapons that might fall into the hands of Pakistani extremist groups or provoke Soviet retaliation against Pakistan. 6/

Recently, the U.S. news media have reported an increase in U.S. covert aid to the resistance, previously estimated at \$75-80 million annually. According to a November 28, 1984 press report, aid for to the Afghan resistance will total \$280 million in fiscal year 1985. 7/ Thus far, resistance spokesmen have denied receiving significant amounts of aid, and bitterly complain that they lack effective anti-aircraft missiles and other weaponry needed to combat Soviet armor and helicopters. Notwithstanding these complaints, which may partially reflect the views of groups which are not the main beneficiaries of covert aid, European and American press accounts suggest that the resistance has been receiving a range of supplies, including Soviet-type assault rifles, mortars, 12.7 heavy machine guns, RPG-7 anti tank rockets, land mines and even a few (and reportedly ineffective) SAM-7 anti-aircraft rockets. 8/

Support for the resistance enjoys overwhelming approval in Congress. In early October 1984, both the House and Senate passed S. Con. Res. 74, which states that it should be the policy of the United States "to support effectively the people of Afghanistan in their fight for freedom." The

6/ Felton, John. Budget Item Opens a Window on Afghan War. Congressional Quarterly. August 4, 1984. p. 1903-1906.

7/ Gelb, Leslie H. U.S. Aides Put '85 Arms Supplies to Afghan Rebels at \$280 million. New York Times, November 28, 1984. p. 1.

8/ Giradet, Edward. Arming Afghan Guerrillas: Perils, Secrecy. Christian Science Monitor. November 20, 1984. p. 15, 16.

resolution was similar to one which had strong support in both houses for the past two years, but had failed to pass -- reportedly due to State Department objections to inclusion of the phrase "material assistance" in regard to U.S. aid. The State Department apparently believed that the wording would be embarrassing to Pakistan, through which the arms must pass. Reportedly the resolution received Administration approval after Senator Paul Tsongas, the original sponsor of the Senate version, agreed to substitute "support effectively" in lieu of "material support." 9/ It passed the Senate by 97-0 on October 3 and by unanimous consent in the House on October 4.

Reportedly, members of key committees of Congress have been instrumental in prodding the Administration to expand substantially the aid program. According to a Washington Post article of January 13, 1985, Congress not only increased covert funding to the \$250-280 million range -- reportedly 80 percent of the total CIA covert operations budget --- but also heavily influenced a decision to provide the anti-Soviet guerrillas with an "advanced anti-aircraft cannon ." 10/

Recent newspaper articles suggest that the reported expansion of the covert aid program may lead to a more open public debate over this issue. Whether the issue will be joined in Congress remains to be seen.

Critics of a significantly expanded aid effort are concerned about escalating a war that they judge cannot be won by the Afghan guerrillas and which could therefore only bring more devastation to that unhappy

9/ Congressional Quarterly. October 9, 1984. p. 2427.

10/ Woodward, Bob and Charles R. Babcock. U.S. Covert Aid to Afghans on the Rise. The Washington Post, January 13, 1985. p. A1, 30.

country. Some, apparently including Administration officials, are also concerned about causing a Soviet escalation and putting Pakistan at greater risk of Soviet reprisals. Conversely, others apparently are opposed to giving Pakistan more leverage to demand additional high technology arms from the United States and evade U.S. efforts to constrain its nuclear activities.

Proponents would probably argue that whether the Afghans can actually drive the Soviets out militarily is irrelevant at this point -- that they have continued to fight for five years and to prevent a Soviet consolidation is reason enough to provide them with the wherewithal to fight more effectively. Eventually, it is argued, the unrelenting opposition may persuade the Soviets that their interests lie in withdrawal. Proponents of expanded aid are especially anxious to provide the resistance with the means to counter the Soviet air threat.

Those on both sides of the issue have criticized the apparent low return on the cost of the program -- which, if reports are accurate, now approaches one half of the annual U.S. aid to Pakistan. Many who support an expanded effort have bitterly criticized the reported siphoning off of aid by Pakistan and alleged corruption among the resistance political groups in Peshawar. ^{11/} Those opposed to expanding the effort see this as one more reason to limit carefully U.S. aid.

Aid to the Refugees

The nearly 3 million refugees in Pakistan are maintained in more than 300 camps administered by the Pakistani authorities with the assistance of

^{11/} Kempe, Frederick. Corruption Said to Divert U.S. Arms From Afghan Rebels Leading to Demands That the Aid Be More Closely Monitored. The Wall Street Journal. December 27, 1984. p. 16.

the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other relief organizations. The effort, which costs over \$500 million annually, is widely regarded as an outstanding success. The Government of Pakistan provides about half of the subsistence for the refugees while the UNHCR, the World Food Organization and various private and government donors supply the balance.

From fiscal year 1980 through FY 1984 the United States provided more than \$360 million in refugee support, the bulk of it -- some \$221 million in PL-480 food aid given through the UN's World Food Program (WFP), the UNHCR, the International Red Cross and various U.S. voluntary agencies. U.S. support to the refugees totaled \$70-71 million in FY 1984, including both food and cash contributions. 12/

12/ Telecon, Bureau for Refugee Programs, Department of State, January 14, 1985.

APPENDIX

Afghan Resistance Groups *

The two main alliances of Sunni Moslem resistance groups are most commonly differentiated as "fundamentalists" and "moderates" (or "traditionalists.") There are also Shi'a groups which are not affiliated with either alliance, and ethnic minority groups that operate alone.

"Fundamentalists"

The fundamentalist alliance includes seven groups, of which three groups and four leaders are most important. The fundamentalists tend to be more ideologically oriented, rather than organized on strict tribal or ethnic lines.

Jami'at-e-Islami

Leader: Prof. Burnhanuddin Rabani

The largest and militarily most effective group is organized along the lines of a political party and has close relations with the Jami'at-e-Islami party of Pakistan. The group has intellectual underpinnings that call for the replacement of both secular traditionalism and communism by an Islamic society. It is less tribal oriented than other groups and includes both Pushtuns and Tajiks, including the young Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Masud of the Panjsher Valley.

Hezb-e Islami

Leader: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar

Hekmatyar is a relatively young leader often compared to the Ayatollah Khomeini in his intense ideological fundamentalism. He is antagonistic both to the West and to the Soviets, and was in opposition to the Daoud regime with Pakistani support, before 1978. Gulbuddin's Hezb-e Islami often clashes with other groups in the field, especially the Jami'at.

Hezb-e Islami (Khalis)

Leader: Mohammad Yunis Khalis.

This group resulted from a split with Hekmatyar. Khalis is a Muslim cleric in his seventies who is a respected commander.

*This appendix draws heavily from Olivier Roy, "Islam in the Afghan Resistance ." Religion in Communist Lands. Vol. 12, Spring 1984. p. 55-58. (Especially p. 55). Also Braasher, Henry S., "Afghanistan." The Washington Quarterly. Summer 1984. p. 42-55, Stahel, Albert A. and Paul Bucherer, "Afghanistan: 5 Jahre Widerstand und Kleinkrieg." Frauenfeld, Switzerland: Huber & Co., AG, 1984; and U.S. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. Hidden War: The Struggle for Afghanistan. Washington, U.S. Govt. Print. Off., April 1984. p. 22.

Abdul Rasool Sayyaf

Leader of the fundamentalist alliance, but with no significant forces of his own. Supported as a unifying figure by Saudi Arabian and other Islamic aid donors.

"Moderate" or "Traditionalist" Groups

There are three parties in the moderate alliance, which is almost exclusively connected to the Pushtun tribal areas of southern Afghanistan. These parties generally are more well known in the West due to their professed support for democracy and other western values. The groups have cooperative relations with each other, and also with the Jami'at and other fundamentalist groups except Gulbuddin's Hezb-e Islami. The moderates have sought to promote the former king, Zahir Shah, as a symbolic figure around whom the resistance groups might rally and who might be acceptable to the Soviets. The fundamentalists, especially Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, believe the deposed King to be a discredited figure and blame him for having invited Soviet advisors into the country in the 1950's.

National Islamic Front (Mahaz-e Melli-ye Islami)

Leader: Sayyed Ahmad Gailani

Sunni traditionalist group. Gailani is a wealthy businessman and a hereditary Pir or religious leader. Connected to the former monarchy by marriage. Militarily significant in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.

Harakat-e Enqilab-e Islami (Islamic Revolutionary Movement)

Leader: Mohammed Nabi Mohammadi.

National Revolutionary Front (Jebhye-ye Melli-ye Nejad)

Leader: Sibghatullah Mojaddidi.

Shi'a GroupsHarakat-e Islami

Leader: Sheikh Assef Mohseni. Shi'a group in the central Hazara region.

Nasr. Extremist, pro-Khomeini Hazara party. Armed by Iran. Central and northern Afghanistan.